

Bill Saporito, *TIME*

It had to come to this eventually. The budget war has morphed into a cultural war. Rep. Betty McCollum (D-MN) wants the Army to stop spending millions of defense dollars on NASCAR sponsorships. The army shells out \$7 million to rent space on the Sprint Cup car driven by Ryan Newman. McCollum says that in these deficit reducing days the army should be spending the money on shells instead. McCollum has been piling up hate faxes from NASCAR fans, (please no jokes about using crayons) and there's no sign yet that Republicans are going to go after, oh, ultimate Frisbee.

But let's consider McCollum's argument. What business does the Army have renting a 200 m.p.h billboard?

Reasonable question, if politically motivated. And by the way, what a stupid fight to pick in the current environment. But the army needs customers, also known as recruits. It's difficult to run an army, not mention operate in dangerous places like Iraq, unless there's a sizeable workforce. As any business can tell you, customer acquisition costs are often significant; the army has all those recruiting stations, manned by its own army of recruiters. The army's "cost per accession" for fiscal 2009 was \$27, 852; it paid an average recruiting bonus of \$13,300. And the exceeded its recruiting target in both 2009 (70,045 recruits) and 2010 (74,577). So you could argue that the \$7 million NASCAR spend was worth it: \$94 bucks a pop for customer acquisition seems like a good deal given the job at hand.

But it may not have been necessary. Recession is the army's best recruiter. And the military's decision to boost recruiting bonuses in the last decade has done more than anything else to not only make the numbers but improve the quality of the workforce, according to a study by RAND. In other words, you get what you pay for. So if the army wants to sponsor a vehicle, maybe a tank is a better choice than a Sprint car. Guaranteed, none of the other drivers is going to want to trade paint with it.